

Galaxy

SCIENCE FICTION

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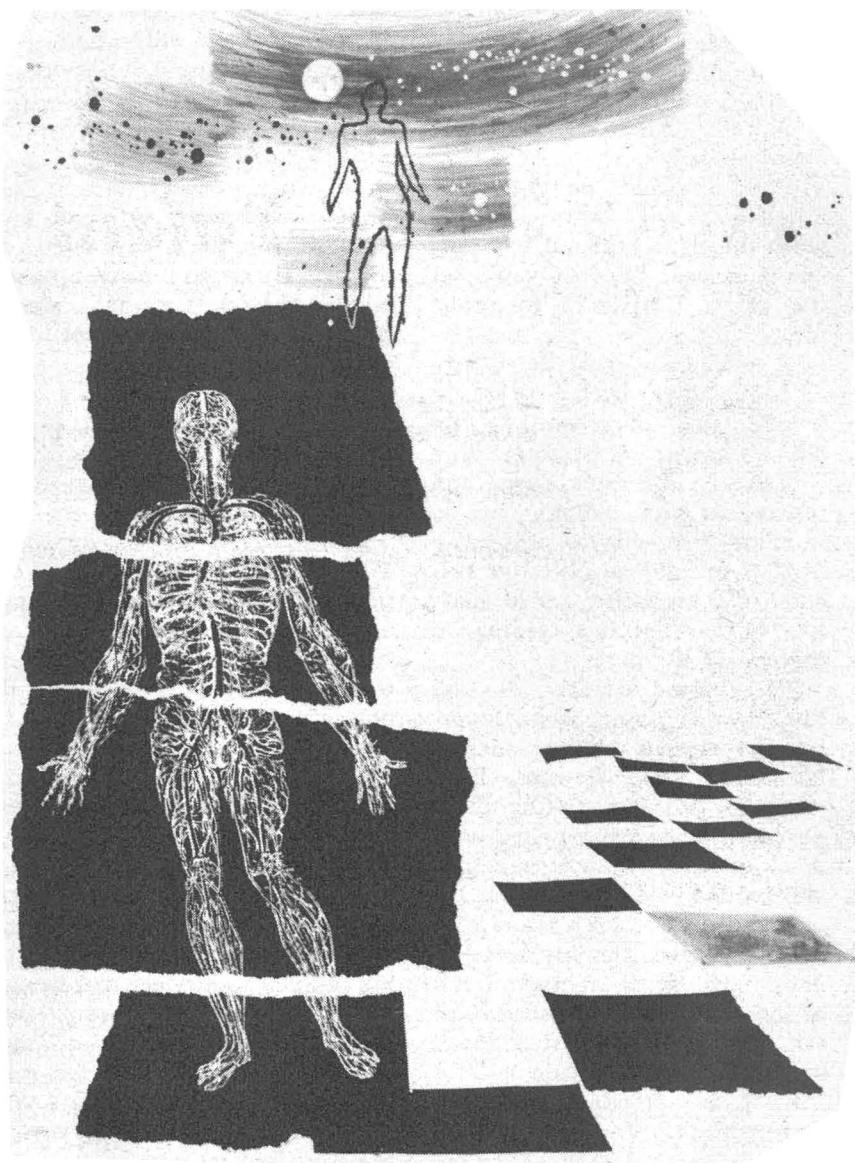
A World of Talent

By PHILIP K. DICK

When two and two equal all or nothing, the total adds up to trouble — especially if the quantities you are dealing with are people!

Illustrated by KOSSIN

WHEN he entered the apartment, a great number of people were making noises and flashing colors. The sudden cacophony confused him. Aware of the surge of shapes, sounds, smells, three-dimensional oblique patches, but trying to peer through and beyond, he halted at the door. With an act of will, he was able to clear



the blur somewhat; the meaningless frenzy of human activity settled gradually into a quasi-orderly pattern.

"What's the matter?" his father asked sharply.

"This is what we previewed a half-hour ago," his mother said when the eight-year-old boy failed to answer. "I wish you'd let me get a Corpsman to probe him."

"I don't fully trust the Corps. And we have twelve years to handle this ourselves. If we haven't cracked it by then—"

"Later." She bent down and ordered in a crisp tone, "Go on in, Tim. Say hello to people."

"Try to hold an objective orientation," his father added gently. "At least for this evening, to the end of the party."

Tim passed silently through the crowded living room, ignoring the various oblique shapes, his body tilted forward, head turned to one side. Neither of his parents followed him; they were intercepted by the host and then surrounded by Norm and Psi guests.

In the melee, the boy was forgotten. He made a brief circuit of the living room, satisfied himself that nothing existed there, and then sought a side hall. A mechanical attendant opened a bedroom door for him and he entered.

THE bedroom was deserted; the party had only begun. He allowed the voices and movement behind him to fade into an indiscriminate blur. Faint perfumes of women drifted through the swank apartment, carried by the warm, Terranlike, artificial air pumped from the central ducts of the city. He raised himself up and inhaled the sweet scents, flowers, fruits, spices — and something more.

He had to go all the way into the bedroom to isolate it. There it was—sour, like spoiled milk—the warning he counted on. And it was in the bedroom.

Cautiously, he opened a closet. The mechanical selector tried to present him with clothing, but he ignored it. With the closet open, the scent was stronger. The Other was somewhere near the closet, if not actually in it.

Under the bed?

He crouched down and peered. Not there. He lay outstretched and stared under Fairchild's metal work-desk, typical furniture of a Colonial official's quarters. Here, the scent was stronger. Fear and excitement touched him. He jumped to his feet and pushed the desk away from the smooth plastic surface of the wall.

The Other clung against the wall in the dark shadows where the desk had rested.

It was a Right Other, of course. He had only identified one Left and that for no more than a split second. The Other hadn't managed to phase totally. He retreated warily from it, conscious that, without his cooperation, it had come as far as it could. The Other watched him calmly, aware of his negative actions, but there was little it could do. It made no attempt to communicate, for that had always failed.

TIM was safe. He halted and spent a long moment scrutinizing the Other. This was his chance to learn more about it. A space separated the two of them, across which only the visual image and odor—small vaporized particles—of the Other crossed.

It was not possible to identify this Other; many were so similar, they appeared to be multiples of the same unit. But sometimes the Other was radically different. Was it possible that various selections were being tried, alternate attempts to get across?

Again the thought struck him. The people in the living room, both Norm and Psi classes—and even the Mute-class of which he was a part — seemed to have reached a workable stalemate with their own Others. It was strange, since their Lefts would be advanced over his own . . .

unless the procession of Rights diminished as the Left group increased.

Was there a finite total of Others?

He went back to the frenetic living room. People murmured and swirled on all sides, gaudy opaque shapes everywhere, warm smells overpowering him with their closeness. It was clear that he would have to get information from his mother and father. He had already spun the research indices hooked to the Sol System educational transmission — spun them without results, since the circuit was not working.

"Where did you wander off to?" his mother asked him, pausing in the animated conversation that had grown up among a group of Norm-class officials blocking one side of the room. She caught the expression on his face.

"Oh," she said. "Even here?"

He was surprised at her question. Location made no difference. Didn't she know that? Floundering, he withdrew into himself to consider. He needed help; he couldn't understand without outside assistance. But a staggering verbal block existed. Was it only a problem of terminology or was it more?

As he wandered around the living room, the vague musty odor filtered to him through the heavy

curtain of people-smells. The Other was still there, crouched in the darkness where the desk had been, in the shadows of the deserted bedroom. Waiting to come over. Waiting for him to take two more steps.

JULIE watched her eight-year-old son move away, an expression of concern on her petite face. "We'll have to keep our eyes on him," she said to her husband. "I preview a mounting situation built around this thing of his."

Curt had caught it, too, but he kept on talking to the Norm-class officials grouped around the two Precogs. "What would you do," he demanded, "if they really opened up on us? You know Big Noodle can't handle a stepped-up shower of robot projectiles. The handful now and then are in the nature of experiments . . . and he has the half-hour warnings from Julie and me."

"True." Fairchild scratched his gray nose, rubbed the stubble of beard showing below his lip. "But I don't think they'll swing to overt war operations. It would be an admission that we're getting somewhere. It would legalize us and open things up. We might collect you Psi-class people together and—" he grinned wearily—"and think the Sol Systems far out past the Andromache Nebula."

CURT listened without resentment, since the man's words were no surprise. As he and Julie had driven over, they had both previewed the party, its unfruitful discussions, the growing aberrations of their son. His wife's precog span was somewhat greater than his own. She was seeing, at this moment, ahead of his own vision. He wondered what the worried expression on her face indicated.

"I'm afraid," Julie said tightly, "that we're going to have a little quarrel before we get home tonight."

Well, he had also seen that. "It's the situation," he said, rejecting the topic. "Everybody here is on edge. It isn't only you and I who're going to be fighting."

Fairchild listened sympathetically. "I can see some drawbacks to being a Precog. But knowing you're going to have a spat, can't you alter things before it begins?"

"Sure," Curt answered, "the way we give you pre-information and you use it to alter the situation with Terra. But neither Julie nor I particularly care. It takes a huge mental effort to stave off something like this . . . and neither of us has that much energy."

"I just wish you'd let me turn him over to the Corps," Julie said in a low voice. "I can't stand

him wandering around, peering under things, looking in closets for God knows what!"

"For Others," Curt said.

"Whatever that might be."

Fairchild, a natural-born moderator, tried intercession. "You've got twelve years," he began. "It's no disgrace to have Tim stay in the Mute-class; every one of you starts out that way. If he has Psi powers, he'll show."

"You talk like an infinite Precog," Julie said, amused. "How do you know they'll show?"

Fairchild's good-natured face twisted with effort. Curt felt sorry for him. Fairchild had too much responsibility, too many decisions to make, too many lives on his hands. Before the Separation with Terra, he had been an appointed official, a bureaucrat with a job and clearly defined routine. Now there was nobody to tap out an inter-system memo to him early Monday morning. Fairchild was working without instructions.

"Let's see that doodad of yours," Curt said. "I'm curious about how it works."

Fairchild was astonished. "How the hell—" Then he remembered. "Sure, you must have already previewed it." He dug around in his coat. "I was going to make it the surprise of the party, but we can't have surprises with you two Precogs around."

The other Norm-class officials

crowded around as their boss unwrapped a square of tissue paper and from it lifted a small glittering stone. An interested silence settled over the room as Fairchild examined the stone, his eyes close to it, like a jeweler studying a precious gem.

"An ingenious thing," Curt admitted.

"Thanks," Fairchild said. "They should start arriving any day, now. The glitter is to attract children and lower-class people who would go out for a bauble—possible wealth, you know. And women, of course. Anybody who would stop and pick up what they thought was a diamond, everybody but the Tech-classes. I'll show you."

HE glanced around the hushed living room at the guests in their gay party clothes. Off to one side, Tim stood with his head turned at an angle. Fairchild hesitated, then tossed the stone across the carpet in front of the boy, almost at his feet. The boy's eyes didn't flicker. He was gazing absently through the people, unaware of the bright object at his feet.

Curt moved forward, ready to take up the social slack. "You'd have to produce something the size of a jet transport." He bent down and retrieved the stone. "It's not your fault that Tim

doesn't respond to such mundane things as fifty-carat diamonds."

Fairchild was crestfallen at the collapse of his demonstration. "I forgot." He brightened. "But there aren't any Mutes on Terra any more. Listen and see what you think of the spiel. I had a hand at writing it."

IN Curt's hand, the stone rested coldly. In his ears, a tiny gnatlike buzz sounded, a controlled, modulated cadence that caused a stir of murmurs around the room.

"My friends," the canned voice stated, "the causes of the conflict between Terra and the Centaurian colonies have been grossly misstated in the press."

"Is this seriously aimed at children?" Julie asked.

"Maybe he thinks Terran children are advanced over our own," a Psi-class official said as a rustle of amusement drifted through the room.

The tinny whine droned on, turning out its mixture of legalistic arguments, idealism and an almost pathetic pleading. The begging quality grated on Curt. Why did Fairchild have to get down on his knees and plead with the Terrans? As he listened, Fairchild puffed confidently on his pipe, arms folded, heavy face thick with satisfaction. Evidently Fairchild wasn't aware of the

precarious thinness of his canned words.

It occurred to Curt that none of them—including himself—was facing how really fragile their Separation movement was. There was no use blaming the weak words wheezing from the pseudogem. Any description of their position was bound to reflect the querulous half-fear that dominated the Colonies.

"It has long been established," the stone asserted, "that freedom is the natural condition of Man. Servitude, the bondage of one man or one group of men to another, is a remnant of the past, a vicious anachronism. Men must govern themselves."

"Strange to hear a stone saying that," Julie said, half-amused. "An inert lump of rock."

"You have been told that the Colonial Secessionist movement will jeopardize your System, your lives and your standard of living. *This is not true.* The standard of living of all mankind will be raised if the colony planets are allowed to govern themselves and find their own economic markets. The mercantile system practiced by the Terran government on Terrans living outside the Sol group—"

"The children will bring this thing home," Fairchild said. "The parents will pick it up from them."

THE stone droned on. "The Colonies could not remain mere supply bases for Terra, sources of raw materials and cheap labor. The Colonists could not remain second-class citizens. Colonists have as much right to determine their own society as those remaining in the Sol group. Thus, the Colonial Government has petitioned the Terran Government for a severance of those bonds to keep us from realizing our manifest destinies."

Curt and Julie exchanged glances. The academic textbook dissertation hung like a dead weight in the room. Was this the man the Colony had elected to manage the resistance movement? A pedant, a salaried official, a bureaucrat and—Curt couldn't help thinking—a man without Psi powers. A Normal.

Fairchild had probably been moved to break with Terra over some trivial miswording of a routine directive. Nobody, except perhaps the telepathic Corps, knew his motives or how long he could keep going.

"What do you think of it?" Fairchild asked when the stone had finished its monologue and had started over. "Millions of them showering down all over the Sol group. You know what the Terran press is saying about us—vicious lies—that we want to take over Sol, that we're hideous

invaders from outer space, monsters, mutants, freaks. We have to counter such propaganda."

"Well," Julie said, "a third of us are freaks, so why not face it? I know my son is a useless freak."

Curt took her arm. "Nobody's calling Tim a freak, not even you!"

"But it's true!" She pulled away. "If we were back in the Sol System—if we hadn't separated—you and I would be in detention camps, waiting to be—you know." She fiercely jabbed in the direction of their son. "There wouldn't be any Tim."

From the corner a sharp-faced man spoke up. "We wouldn't be in the Sol System. We'd have broken out on our own without anybody's help. Fairchild had nothing to do with it; we brought him along. Don't ever forget that!"

Curt eyed the man hostilely. Reynolds, chief of the telepathic Corps, was drunk again. Drunk and spilling over his load of vitriolic hate for Norms.

"Possibly," Curt agreed, "but we would have had a hell of a time doing it."

"You and I know what keeps this Colony alive," Reynolds answered, his flushed face arrogant and sneering. "How long could these bureaucrats keep on going without Big Noodle and Sally, you two Precogs, the Corps and

all the rest of us? Face facts—we don't need this legalistic window-dressing. We're not going to win because of any pious appeals for freedom and equality. We're going to win because there are no Psis on Terra."

THE geniality of the room dwindled. Angry murmurs rose from the Norm-class guests.

"Look here," Fairchild said to Reynolds, "you're still a human being, even if you can read minds. Having a talent doesn't—"

"Don't lecture me," Reynolds said. "No *numbskull* is going to tell me what to do."

"You're going too far," Curt told Reynolds. "Somebody's going to smack you down some day. If Fairchild doesn't do it, maybe I will."

"You and your meddling Corps," a Psi-class Resurrector said to Reynolds, grabbing hold of his collar. "You think you're above us because you can merge your minds. You think—"

"Take your hands off me," Reynolds said in an ugly voice. A glass crashed to the floor; one of the women became hysterical. Two men struggled; a third joined and, in a flash, a wild turmoil of resentment was boiling in the center of the room.

Fairchild shouted for order. "For God's sake, if we fight each other, we're finished. Don't you

understand—we *have to work together!*"

It took a while before the uproar subsided. Reynolds pushed past Curt, white-faced and muttering under his breath. "I'm getting out of here." The other Telepaths trailed belligerently after him.

AS he and Julie drove slowly home through the bluish darkness, one section of Fairchild's propaganda repeated itself in Curt's brain over and over again.

"You've been told a victory by the Colonists means a victory of Psis over Normal human beings. This is not true! The Separation was not planned and is not conducted by either Psis or Mutants. The revolt was a spontaneous reaction by Colonists of all classes."

"I wonder," Curt mused. "Maybe Fairchild's wrong. Maybe he's being operated by Psis without knowing it. Personally, I like him, stupid as he is."

"Yes, he's stupid," Julie agreed. In the darkness of the car's cabin, her cigarette was a bright burning coal of wrath. In the back seat, Tim lay curled up asleep, warmed by the heat from the motor. The barren, rocky landscape of Proxima III rolled out ahead of the small surface-car, a dim expanse, hostile and alien. A few Man-made roads and

buildings lay here and there among crop-tanks and fields.

"I don't trust Reynolds," Curt continued, knowing he was opening the previewed scene between them, yet not willing to sidestep it. "Reynolds is smart, unscrupulous and ambitious. What he wants is prestige and status. But Fairchild is thinking of the welfare of the Colony. He means all that stuff he dictated into his stones."

"That drivel," Julie was scornful. "The Terrans will laugh their heads off. Listening to it with a straight face was more than I could manage, and God knows our lives depend on this business."

"Well," Curt said carefully, knowing what he was getting into, "there may be Terrans with more sense of justice than you and Reynolds." He turned toward her. "I can see what you're going to do and so can you. Maybe you're right, maybe we ought to get it over with. Ten years is a long time when there's no feeling. And it wasn't our idea in the first place."

"No," Julie agreed. She crushed her cigarette out and shakily lit another. "If there had been another male Precog besides you, just one. That's something I can't forgive Reynolds for. It was his idea, you know. I never should have agreed. For the glory of the

race! Onward and upward with the Psi banner! The mystical mating of the first real Precogs in history . . . and look what came of it!"

"Shut up," Curt said. "He's not asleep and he can hear you."

JULIE'S voice was bitter. "Hear me, yes. Understand, no. We wanted to know what the second generation would be like —well, now we know. Precog plus Precog equal *freak*. Useless mutant. Monster—let's face it, the M on his card stands for *monster*."

Curt's hands tightened on the wheel. "That's a word neither you nor anybody else is going to use."

"Monster!" She leaned close to him, teeth white in the light from the dashboard, eyes glowing. "Maybe the Terrans are right —maybe we Precogs ought to be sterilized and put to death. Erased: I think . . ." She broke off abruptly, unwilling to finish.

"Go ahead," Curt said. "You think perhaps when the revolt is successful and we're in control of the Colonies, we should go down the line selectively. With the Corps on top naturally."

"Separate the wheat from the chaff," Julie said. "First the Colonies from Terra. Then us from them. And when he comes up, even if he is my son . . ."

"What you're doing," Curt

interrupted, "is passing judgment on people according to their use. Tim isn't useful, so there's no point in letting him live, right?" His blood pressure was on the way up, but he was past caring. "Breeding people like cattle. A human hasn't a right to live; that's a privilege we dole out according to our whim."

Curt raced the car down the deserted highway. "You heard Fairchild prattle about freedom and equality. He believes it and so do I. And I believe Tim—or anybody else—has a right to exist whether we can make use of his talent or whether he even *has* a talent."

"He has a right to live," Julie said, "but remember *he's not one of us*. He's an oddity. He doesn't have our ability, our—" she ground out the words triumphantly—"superior ability."

Curt pulled the car over to the edge of the highway. He brought it to a halt and pushed open the door. Dismal, arid air billowed into the car.

"You drive on home." He leaned over the back seat and prodded Tim into wakefulness. "Come on, kid. We're getting out."

Julie reached over to get the wheel. "When will you be home? Or have you got it completely set up now? Better make sure. She might be the kind that has a few others on the string."

Curt stepped from the car and the door slammed behind him. He took his son's hand and led him down the roadway to the black square of a ramp that rose darkly in the night gloom. As they started up the steps, he heard the car roar off down the highway, through the darkness toward home.

"Where are we?" Tim asked.

"You know this place. I bring you here every week. This is the school where they train people like you and me—where we Psis get our education."

II

LIIGHTS came on around them. Corridors branched off the main entrance ramp like metal vines.

"You may stay here for a few days," Curt said to his son. "Can you stand not seeing your mother for a while?"

Curt didn't answer. He had lapsed back into his usual silence as he followed along beside his father. Curt again wondered how the boy could be so withdrawn—as he obviously was—and yet be so terribly alert. The answer was written over each inch of the taut, young body. Tim was only withdrawn from contact with human beings. He maintained an almost compulsive tangency with the outside world—or, rather, an out-

side world. Whatever it was, it didn't include humans, although it was made up of real, external objects.

As he had already previewed, his son suddenly broke away from him. Curt let the boy hurry down a side corridor. He watched as Tim stood tugging anxiously at a supply locker, trying to get it open.

"Okay," Curt said resignedly. He followed after him and unlocked the locker with his pass key. "See? There's nothing in it."

How completely the boy lacked precog could be seen by the flood of relief that swept his face. Curt's heart sank at the sight. The precious talent that both he and Julie possessed simply hadn't been passed on. Whatever the boy was, he was not a Precog.

It was past two in the morning, but the interior departments of the School Building were alight with activity. Curt moodily greeted a couple of Corpsmen lounging around the bar, surrounded by beers and ashtrays.

"Where's Sally?" he demanded. "I want to go in and see Big Noodle."

One of the Telepaths lazily jerked a thumb. "She's around somewhere. Over that way, in the kids' quarters, probably asleep. It's late." He eyed Curt, whose thoughts were on Julie. "You ought to get rid of a wife like

that. She's too old and thin, anyhow. What you'd really like is a plump young dish—"

Curt lashed a blast of mental dislike and was satisfied to see the grinning young face go hard with antagonism. The other Telepath pulled himself upright and shouted after Curt, "When you're through with your wife, send her around to us."

"I'd say you're after a girl of about twenty," another Telepath said as he admitted Curt to the sleeping quarters of the children's wing. "Dark hair—correct me if I'm wrong—and dark eyes. You have a fully formed image. Maybe there's a specific girl. Let's see, she's short, fairly pretty and her name is—"

Curt cursed at the situation that required them to turn their minds over to the Corps. Telepaths were interlaced throughout the Colonies and, in particular, throughout the School and the offices of the Colonial Government. He tightened his grip around Tim's hand and led him through the doorway.

"This kid of yours," the Telepath said as Tim passed close to him, "sure probes queer. Mind if I go down a little?"

"Keep out of his mind!" Curt ordered sharply. He slammed the door shut after Tim, knowing it made no difference, but enjoying the feel of the heavy metal slid-

ing in place. He pushed Tim down a narrow corridor and into a small room. Tim pulled away, intent on a side door; Curt savagely yanked him back. "There's nothing in there!" he reprimanded harshly. "That's only a bathroom."

Tim continued to tug away. He was still tugging when Sally appeared, fastening a robe around her, face puffy with sleep. "Hello, Mr. Purcell," she greeted Curt. "Hello, Tim." Yawning, she turned on a floor lamp and tossed herself down on a chair. "What can I do for you this time of night?"

SHE was thirteen, tall and gangling, with yellow corn-silk hair and freckled skin. She picked sleepily at her thumbnail and yawned again as the boy sat down across from her. To amuse him, she animated a pair of gloves lying on a sidetable. Tim laughed with delight as the gloves groped their way to the edge of the table, waved their fingers blindly and began a cautious descent to the floor.

"Fine," Curt said. "You're getting good. I'd say you're not cutting any classes."

Sally shrugged. "Mr. Purcell, the School can't teach me anything. You know I'm the most advanced Psi with the power of animation. They just let me work

alone. In fact, I'm instructing a bunch of little kids, still Mutes, who might have something. I think a couple of them could work out, with practice. All they can give me is encouragement; you know, psychological stuff and lots of vitamins and fresh air. But they can't *teach* me anything."

"They can teach you how important you are," Curt said. He had previewed this, of course. During the last half hour, he had selected a number of possible approaches, discarded one after another, finally ended with this. "I came over to see Big Noodle. That meant I had to wake you. Do you know why?"

"Sure," Sally answered. "You're afraid of him. And since Big Noodle is afraid of *me*, you need me to come along." She allowed the gloves to sag back into immobility as she got to her feet. "Well, let's go."

He had seen Big Noodle many times in his life, but he had never got used to the sight. Awed, in spite of his preview of this scene, Curt stood in the open space before the platform, gazing up, silent and impressed as always.

"He's fat," Sally said practically. "If he doesn't get thinner, he won't live long."

Big Noodle slumped like a gray, sickly pudding in the immense chair the Tech Depart-

ment had built for him. His eyes were half-closed; his pulpy arms lay slack and inert at his sides. Wads of oozing dough hung in folds over the arms and sides of the chair. Big Noodle's egglike skull was fringed with damp, stringy hair, matted like decayed seaweed. His nails were lost in the sausage fingers. His teeth were rotting and black. His tiny plate-blue eyes flickered dully as he identified Curt and Sally, but the obese body did not stir.

"He's resting," Sally explained. "He just ate."

"Hello," Curt said.

From the swollen mouth, between rolls of pink flesh lips, a grumbled response came.

"He doesn't like to be bothered this late," Sally said yawning. "I don't blame him."

SHE wandered around the room, amusing herself by animating light brackets along the wall. The brackets struggled to pull free from the hot-pour plastic in which they were set.

"This seems so dumb, if you don't mind my saying so, Mr. Purcell. The Telepaths keep Terran infiltrators from coming in here, and all this business of yours is against them. That means you're helping Terra, doesn't it? If we didn't have the Corps to watch out for us—"

"I keep out Terrans," Big

Noodle mumbled. "I have my wall and I turn back everything."

"You turn back projectiles," Sally said, "but you can't keep out infiltrators. A Terran infiltrator could come in here this minute and you wouldn't know. You're just a big stupid lump of lard."

Her description was accurate. But the vast mound of fat was the nexus of the Colony's defense, the most talented of the Psis. Big Noodle was the core of the Separation movement and the living symbol of its problem.

Big Noodle had almost infinite parakinetic power and the mind of a moronic three-year-old. He was, specifically, an idiot savant. His legendary powers had absorbed his whole personality, withered and degenerated it, rather than expanded it. He could have swept the Colony aside years ago if his bodily lusts and fears had been accompanied by cunning. But Big Noodle was helpless and inert, totally dependent on the instructions of the Colonial Government, reduced to sullen passivity by his terror of Sally.

"I ate a whole pig." Big Noodle struggled to a quasi-sitting position, belched, wiped feebly at his chin. "Two pigs, in fact. Right here in this room, just a little while ago. I could get more if I wanted."

The diet of the colonists consisted mainly of tank-grown artificial protein. Big Noodle was amusing himself at their expense.

"The pig," Big Noodle continued grandly, "came from Terra. The night before, I had a flock of wild ducks. And before that, I brought over some kind of animal from Betelgeuse IV. It doesn't have any name; it just runs around and eats."

"Like you," Sally said. "Only you don't run around."

Big Noodle giggled. Pride momentarily overcame his fear of the girl. "Have some candy," he offered. A shower of chocolate rattled down like hail. Curt and Sally retreated as the floor of the chamber disappeared under the deluge. With the chocolate came fragments of machinery, cardboard boxes, sections of display counter, a jagged chunk of concrete floor. "Candy factory on Terra," Big Noodle explained happily. "I've got it pinpointed pretty good."

Tim had awakened from his contemplation. He bent down and eagerly picked up a handful of chocolates.

"Go ahead," Curt said to him. "You might as well take them."

"I'm the only one that gets the candy," Big Noodle thundered, outraged. The chocolate vanished. "I sent it back," he explained peevishly. "It's mine."





THREE was nothing malevolent in Big Noodle, only an infinite childish selfishness. Through his power, every object in the Universe had become his possession. There was nothing outside the reach of his bloated arms; he could reach for the Moon and get it. Fortunately, most things were outside his span of comprehension. He was uninterested.

"Let's cut out these games," Curt said. "Can you say if any Telepaths are within probe range of us?"

Big Noodle made a begrudging search. He had a consciousness of objects wherever they were. Through his talent, he was in contact with the physical contents of the Universe.

"None near here," he declared after a time. "One about a hundred feet off . . . I'll move him back. I hate Teeps getting into my privacy."

"Everybody hates Teeps," Sally said. "It's a nasty, dirty talent. Looking into other people's minds is like watching them when they're bathing or dressing or eating. It isn't natural."

Curt grinned. "Is it any different from Precog? You wouldn't call that natural."

"Precog has to do with events, not people," Sally said. "Knowing what's going to happen isn't any worse than knowing what's

already happened."

"It might even be better," Curt pointed out.

"No," Sally said emphatically. "It's got us into this trouble. I have to watch what I think all the time because of you. Every time I see a Teep, I get goose bumps, and no matter how hard I try, I can't keep from thinking about her, just because I know I'm not supposed to."

"My precog faculty has nothing to do with Pat," Curt said. "Precog doesn't introduce fatality. Locating Pat was an intricate job. It was a deliberate choice I made."

"Aren't you sorry?" Sally demanded.

"No."

"If it wasn't for me," Big Noodle interrupted, "you never would have got across to Pat."

"I wish we hadn't," Sally said fervently. "If it wasn't for Pat, we wouldn't be mixed up in all this business." She shot a hostile glance at Curt. "And I don't think she's pretty."

"What would you suggest?" Curt asked the child with more patience than he felt. He had pre-viewed the futility of making a child and an idiot understand about Pat. "You know we can't pretend we never found her."

"I know," Sally admitted. "And the Teeps have got something from our minds already."

That's why there're so many of them hanging around here. It's a good thing we don't know where she is."

"I know where she is," Big Noodle said. "I know exactly where."

"No, you don't," Sally answered. "You just know how to get to her and that's not the same thing. You can't explain it; you just send us over there and back."

IT'S a planet," Big Noodle said angrily, "with funny plants and a lot of green things. And the air's thin. She lives in a camp. People go out and farm all day. There's only a few people there. A lot of dopy animals live there. It's cold."

"Where is it?" Curt asked.

Big Noodle sputtered. "It's . . ." His pulpy arms waved. "It's some place near . . ." He gave up, wheezed resentfully at Sally and then brought a tank of filthy water into being above the girl's head. As the water flowed toward her, the child made a few brief motions with her hands.

Big Noodle shrieked in terror and the water vanished. He lay panting with fright, body quivering, as Sally mopped at a wet spot on her robe. She had animated the fingers of his left hand.

"Better not do that again," Curt said to her. "His heart might give out."

"The big slob." Sally rummaged around in a supply closet. "Well, if you've made up your mind, we might as well get it over with. Only let's not stay so long. You get to talking with Pat and then the two of you go off, and you don't come back for hours. At night, it's freezing and they don't have any heating plants." She pulled down a coat from the closet. "I'll take this with me."

"We're not going," Curt told her. "This time is going to be different."

Sally blinked. "Different? How?"

Even Big Noodle was surprised. "I was just getting ready to move you across," he complained.

"I know," Curt said firmly. "But this time I want you to bring Pat here. Bring her to this room, understand? This is the time we've been talking about. The big moment's arrived."

THERE was only one person with Curt as he entered Fairchild's office. Sally was now in bed, back at the school. Big Noodle never stirred from his chamber. Tim was still at the School, in the hands of Psi-class authorities, not Telepaths.

Pat followed hesitantly, frightened and nervous as the men sitting around the office glanced up in annoyance.

She was perhaps nineteen, slim and copper-skinned, with large dark eyes. She wore a canvas workshirt and jeans, heavy shoes caked with mud. Her tangle of black curls was tied back and knotted with a red bandanna. Her rolled-up sleeves showed tanned, competent arms. At her leather belt she carried a knife, a field telephone and an emergency pack of rations and water.

"This is the girl," Curt said. "Take a good look at her."

"Where are you from?" Fairchild asked Pat. He pushed aside a heap of directives and memotapes to find his pipe.

Pat hesitated. "I—" she began. She turned uncertainly to Curt. "You told me never to say, even to you."

"It's okay," Curt said gently. "You can tell us now." He explained to Fairchild, "I can preview what she's going to say, but I never knew before. I didn't want to get it probed out of me by the Corps."

"I was born on Proxima VI," Pat said in a low voice. "I grew up there. This is the first time I've left the planet."

Fairchild's eyes widened. "That's a wild place. In fact, about our most primitive region."

Around the office, his group of Norm and Psi consultants moved closer to watch. One wide-shouldered old man, face weathered as

stone, eyes shrewd and alert, raised his hand. "Are we to understand that Big Noodle brought you here?"

Pat nodded. "I didn't know. I mean it was unexpected." She tapped her belt. "I was working, clearing the brush . . . we've been trying to expand, develop more usable land."

"What's your name?" Fairchild asked her.

"Patricia Ann Connley."

"What class?"

The girl's sun-cracked lips moved. "Mute-class."

A stir moved through the officials. "You're a Mutant," the old man asked her, "without Psi powers? Exactly how do you differ from the Norm?"

PAT glanced at Curt and he moved forward to answer for her. "This girl will be twenty-one in two years. You know what that means. If she's still in the Mute-class, she'll be sterilized and put in a camp. That's our Colonial policy. And if Terra whips us, she'll be sterilized in any case, as will all of us Psis and Mutants."

"Are you trying to say she has a talent?" Fairchild asked. "You want us to lift her from Mute to Psi?" His hands fumbled at the papers on the table. "We get a thousand petitions a day like this. You came down here at four in the morning just for this? There's

a routine form you can fill out, a common office procedure."

The old man cleared his throat and blurted, "This girl is close to you?"

"That's right," Curt said. "I have a personal interest."

"How did you meet her?" the old man asked. "If she's never been off Proxima VI . . ."

"Big Noodle shuttled me there and back," Curt answered. "I've made the trip about twenty times. I didn't know it was Prox VI, of course. I only knew it was a Colony planet, primitive, still wild. Originally, I came across an analysis of her personality and neural characteristics in our Mute-class files. As soon as I understood, I gave Big Noodle the identifying brain pattern and had him send me across."

"What is that pattern?" Fairchild asked. "What's different about her?"

"Pat's talent has never been acknowledged as Psi," Curt said. "In a way, it isn't, but it's going to be one of the most useful talents we've discovered. We should have known it would arise. Wherever some organism develops, so does another to prey on it."

"Get to the point," Fairchild said. He rubbed the blue stubble of his chin. "When you called me, all you said was that—"

"Consider the various Psi tal-

ents as survival weapons," Curt said. "Consider telepathic ability as evolving for the defense of an organism. It puts the Telepath head and shoulders above his enemies. Is this going to continue? *Don't these things usually balance out?*"

It was the old man who understood. "I see," he said with a grin of wry admiration. "This girl is opaque to telepathic probes."

"That's right," Curt said. "The first, but there'll most likely be others. And not only defenses to telepathic probes. There are going to be organisms resistant to Parakineticists, to Precogs like myself, to Resurrectionists, to Animators, to every and all Psi powers. Now we have a fourth class. The Anti-Psi class. It was bound to come into existence."

III

THE coffee was artificial, but hot and satisfying. Like the eggs and bacon it was synthetically compounded from tank-grown meals and proteins, with a carefully regulated mix of native-grown plant fiber. As they ate, the morning sun rose outside. The barren gray landscape of Proxima III was touched with a faint tint of red.

"It looks nice," Pat said shyly, glancing out the kitchen window.

"Maybe I can examine your farming equipment. You have a lot we don't have."

"We've had more time," Curt reminded her. "This planet was settled a century before your own. You'll catch up with us. In many ways Prox VI is richer and more fertile."

Julie wasn't sitting at the table. She stood leaning against the refrigerator, arms folded, her face hard and frigid. "Is she really staying here?" she demanded in a thin, clipped voice. "In this house with us?"

"That's right," Curt answered. "How long?"

"A few days. A week. Until I can get Fairchild moving."

Faint sounds stirred beyond the house. Here and there in the residential syndrome people were waking up and preparing for the day. The kitchen was warm and cheerful; a window of clear plastic separated it from the landscape of tumbled rocks, thin trees and plants that stretched to a line of weathered mountains a few hundred miles off. Cold morning wind whipped around the rubbish that littered the deserted inter-system field at the rim of the syndrome.

"That field was the link between us and the Sol System," Curt said. "The umbilical cord. Gone now, for a while at least."

"It's beautiful," Pat stated.

"The field?"

She gestured at the towers of an elaborate mining and smelting combine partly visible beyond the rows of houses. "Those, I mean. The landscape is like ours; bleak and awful. It's all the installations that mean something where you've pushed the landscape back." She shivered. "We've been fighting trees and rocks all my life, trying to get the soil usable, trying to make a place to live. We don't have any heavy equipment on Prox VI, just hand tools and our own backs. You know, you've seen our villages."

Curt sipped his coffee. "Are there many Psis on Prox VI?"

"A few. Mostly minor. A few Resurrectors, a handful of Animators. No one even as good as Sally." She laughed, showing her even white teeth. "We're rustic hicks, compared to this urban metropolis. You saw how we live. Villages stuck here and there, farms, a few isolated supply centers, one miserable field. You saw my family, my brothers and my father, our home life, if you can call that log shack a home. Three centuries behind Terra."

"They taught you about Terra?"

"Oh, yes. Tapes came direct from the Sol System until the Separation. Not that I'm sorry we separated. We should have

been out working anyhow, instead of watching the tapes. But it was interesting to see the mother world, the big cities, all the billions of people. And the earlier colonies on Venus and Mars. It was amazing." Her voice throbbed with excitement. "Those colonies were like ours, once. They had to clear Mars the same way we're clearing Prox VI. We'll get Prox VI cleared, cities built up and fields laid out. And we'll all go on doing our part."

JULIE detached herself from the refrigerator and began gathering dishes from the table without looking at Pat. "Maybe I'm being naive," she said to Curt, "but where's she going to sleep?"

"You know the answer," Curt answered patiently. "You've previewed all this. Tim's at the School so she can have his room."

"What am I supposed to do? Feed her, wait on her, be her maid? What am I supposed to tell people when they see her?" Julie's voice rose to a shrill. "Am I supposed to say she's my sister?"

Pat smiled across at Curt, toy-
ing with a button on her shirt. It was apparent that she was untouched, remote from Julie's harsh voice. Probably that was why the Corps couldn't probe

her. Detached, almost aloof, she seemed unaffected by rancor and violence.

"She won't need any supervision," Curt said to his wife. "Leave her alone."

Julie lit a cigarette with rapid, jerky fingers. "I'll be glad to leave her alone. But she can't go around in those work clothes looking like a convict."

"Find her something of yours," Curt suggested.

Julie's face twisted. "She couldn't wear my things; she's too heavy." To Pat she said with deliberate cruelty, "What are you, about a size 30 waist? My God, what have you been doing, dragging a plow? Look at her neck and shoulders . . . she looks like a field-horse."

Curt got abruptly to his feet and pushed his chair back from the table. "Come on," he said to Pat. It was vital to show her something besides this undercurrent of resentment. "I'll show you around."

Pat leaped up, her cheeks flushed. "I want to see everything. This is all so new." She hurried after him as he grabbed his coat and headed for the front door. "Can we see the School where you train the Psis? I want to see how you develop their abilities. And can we see how the Colonial Government is organized? I want to see how Fairchild

works with the Psis."

Julie followed the two of them out onto the front porch. Cool, chill morning air billowed around them, mixed with the sounds of cars heading from the residential syndrome toward the city. "In my room you'll find skirts and blouses," she said to Pat. "Pick out something light. It's warmer here than on Prox VI."

"Thank you," Pat said. She hurried back into the house.

SHE'S pretty," Julie said to Curt. "When I get her washed and dressed, I guess she'll look all right. She's got a figure—in a healthy sort of way. But is there anything to her mind? To her personality?"

"Sure," Curt answered.

Julie shrugged. "Well, she's young. A lot younger than I am." She smiled wanly. "Remember when we first met? Ten years ago . . . I was so curious to see you, talk to you. The only other Precog besides myself. I had so many dreams and hopes about both of us. I was her age, perhaps a little younger."

"It was hard to see how it would work out," Curt said. "Even for us. A half-hour preview isn't much, in a thing like this."

"How long has it been?" Julie asked.

"Not long."

"Have there been other girls?"

"No. Only Pat."

"When I realized there was somebody else, I hoped she was good enough for you. If I could be sure this girl had something to offer. I suppose it's her remoteness that gives an impression of emptiness. And you have more rapport with her than I do. Probably you don't feel the lack, if it is a lack. And it may be tied in with her talent, her opaqueness."

Curt fastened the cuffs of his coat. "I think it's a kind of innocence. She's not touched by a lot of things we have here in our urban, industrial society. When you were talking about her it didn't seem to reach her."

Julie touched his arm lightly. "Then take care of her. She's going to need it around here. I wonder what Reynolds' reaction is going to be."

"Do you see anything?"

"Nothing about her. You're going off . . . I'm by myself for the next interval, as far as I can preview, working around the house. As for now, I'm going into town to do some shopping, to pick up some new clothes. Maybe I can get something for her to wear."

"We'll get her things," Curt said. "She should get her clothes first-hand."

Pat appeared in a cream-col-

ored blouse and ankle-length yellow skirt, black eyes sparkling, hair moist with morning mist. "I'm ready! Can we go now?"

Sunlight glittered down on them as they stepped eagerly onto the level ground. "We'll go over to the School first and pick up my son."

THE three of them walked slowly along the gravel path that led by the white concrete School Building, by the faint sheen of wet lawn that was carefully maintained against the hostile weather of the planet. Tim scampered on ahead of Pat and Curt, listening and peering intently past the objects around him, body tensed forward, lithe and alert.

"He doesn't speak much," Pat observed.

"He's too busy to pay any attention to us."

Tim halted to gaze behind a shrub. Pat followed a little after him, curious. "What's he looking for? He's a beautiful child . . . he has Julie's hair. She has nice hair."

"Look over there," Curt said to his son. "There're plenty of children to sort over. Go play with them."

At the entrance to the main School Building, parents and their children swarmed in restless, anxious groups. Uniformed

School Officials moved among them, sorting, checking, dividing the children into various sub-groups. Now and then a small sub-group was admitted through the check-system into the School Building. Apprehensive, pathetically hopeful, the mothers waited outside.

Pat said. "It's like that on Prox VI, when the School Teams come to make their census and inspection. Everybody wants to get the unclassified children put up into the Psi-class. My father tried for years to get me out of Mute. He finally gave up. That report you saw was one of his periodic requests. It was filed away somewhere, wasn't it? Gathering dust in a drawer."

"If this works out," Curt said, "many more children will have a chance to get out of the Mute-class. You won't be the only one. You're the first of many, we hope."

Pat kicked at a pebble. "I don't feel so new, so astonishingly different. I don't feel anything at all. You say I'm opaque to telepathic invasion, but I've only been scanned one or two times in my life." She touched her head with her copper-colored fingers and smiled. "If no Corpsman is scanning me, I'm just like anybody else."

"Your ability is a counter-talent," Curt pointed out. "It takes

the original talent to call it into being. Naturally, you're not conscious of it during your ordinary routine of living."

"A counter-talent. It seems so—so negative. I don't do anything, like you do—I don't move objects or turn stones into bread or give birth without impregnation or bring dead people back to life. I just negate somebody else's ability. It seems like a hostile, stultifying sort of ability—to just cancel out the telepathic factor."

"That could be as useful as the telepathic factor itself. Especially for all of us non-teeps."

SUPPOSE somebody comes along who balances your ability, Curt." She had turned dead serious, sounding discouraged and unhappy. "People will arise who balance out *all* Psi talents. We'll be back where we started from. It'll be like not having Psi at all."

"I don't think so," Curt answered. "The Anti-Psi factor is a natural restoration of balance. One insect learns to fly, so another learns to build a web to trap him. Is that the same as no flight? Clams developed hard shells to protect them; therefore birds learn to fly the clam up high in the air and drop him on a rock. In a sense you're a life-form preying on the Psis and the

Psis are life-forms that prey on the Norms. That makes you a friend of the Norm-class. Balance, the full circle, predator and prey. It's an eternal system and frankly I can't see how it could be improved."

"You might be considered a traitor."

"Yes," Curt agreed. "I suppose so."

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"It bothers me that people will feel hostile toward me. But you can't live very long without arousing hostility. Julie feels hostility toward you. Reynolds feels hostility for me already. You can't please everybody, because people want different things. Please one and you displease another. In this life you have to decide which of them you want to please. I'd prefer to please Fairchild."

"He should be glad."

"If he's aware of what's going on. Fairchild's an overworked bureaucrat. He may decide I exceeded my authority in acting on your father's petition. He may want it filed back where it was, and you returned to Prox VI. He may even fine me a penalty."

THEY left the School and drove down the long highway to the shore of the ocean. Tim shouted with happiness at the vast stretch of deserted beach

as he raced off, arms waving, his yells lost in the ceaseless lapping of the ocean waves. The red-tinted sky warmed above them. The three of them were completely isolated by the bowl of ocean and sky and beach. No other humans were visible, only a flock of indigenous birds strolling around in search of sand crustaceans.

"It's wonderful," Pat said, awed. "I guess the oceans on Terra are like this, big and bright and red."

"Blue," Curt corrected. He lay sprawled out on the warm sand, smoking his pipe and gazing moodily at the probing waves that oozed up on the beach a few yards away. The waves left heaps of steaming sea-plants stranded.

Tim came hurrying back with his arms full of the dripping, slimy weeds. He dumped the coils of still quivering vegetable life in front of Pat and his father.

"He likes the ocean," Pat said.

"No hiding places for Others," Curt answered, "He can see for miles, so he knows they can't creep up on him."

"Others?" She was curious. "He's such a strange boy. So worried and busy. He takes his alternate world so seriously. Not a pleasant world, I guess. Too many responsibilities."

The sky turned hot. Tim began building an intricate structure

out of wet sand lugged from the water's edge.

Pat scampered barefooted to join Tim. The two of them labored, adding infinite walls and side-buildings and towers. In the hot glare of the water, the girl's bare shoulders and back dripped perspiration. She sat up finally, gasping and exhausted, pushed her hair from her eyes and struggled to her feet.

"It's too hot," she gasped, throwing herself down beside Curt. "The weather's so different here. I'm sleepy."

Tim continued building the structure. The two of them watched him languidly, crumbling bits of dry sand between their fingers.

"I guess," Pat said after a while, "there isn't much left to your marriage. I've made it impossible for you and Julie to live together."

"It's not your fault. We were never really together. All we had in common was our talent and that has nothing to do with the over-all personality. The total individual."

Pat slid off her skirt and waded down to the ocean's edge. She curled up in the swirling pink foam and began washing her hair. Half-buried in the piles of foam and seaweed, her sleek, tanned body glowed wet and healthy in the overhead sun.

"Come on!" she called to Curt. "It's so cool."

Curt knocked the ashes from his pipe into the dry sand. "We have to get back. Sooner or later I've got to have it out with Fairchild. We need a decision."

Pat strode from the water, body streaming, head tossed back, hair dripping down her shoulders. Tim attracted her attention and she halted to study his sand building.

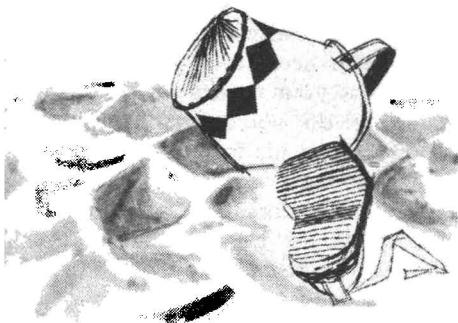
"You're right," she said to Curt. "We shouldn't be here wading and dozing and building sand castles. Fairchild's trying to keep the Separation working, and we have real things to build up in the backward Colonies."

As she dried herself with Curt's coat she told him about Proxima VI.

"It's like the Middle Ages back on Terra. Most of our people think Psi powers are miracles. They think the Psis are saints."

"I suppose that's what the saints were," Curt agreed. "They raised the dead, turned inorganic material into organic and moved objects around. The Psi ability has probably always been present in the human race. The Psi-class individual isn't new; he's always been with us, helping here and there, sometimes doing harm when he exploited his talent against mankind."





Pat tugged on her sandals. "There's an old woman near our village, a first-rate Resurrector. She won't leave Prox VI; she won't go with the Government Teams or get mixed up with the School. She wants to stay where she is, being a witch and wise woman. People come to her and she heals the sick."

Pat fastened her blouse and started toward the car. "When I was seven I broke my arm. She put her old withered hands on it and the break repaired itself. Apparently her hands radiate some kind of generative field that affects the growth-rate of the cells. And I remember one time when a boy was drowned and she brought him back to life."

"Get an old woman who can heal, another who can precog the future, and your village is set up. We Psis have been helping longer than we realize."

"Come on, Tim!" Pat called, tanned hands to her lips. "Time to go back!"

The boy bent down one last time to peer into the depths of his structure, the elaborate inner sections of his sand building.

Suddenly he screamed, leaped back and came racing frantically toward the car.

Pat caught hold of him and he clung to her, face distorted with terror. "What is it?" Pat was frightened. "Curt, what was it?"

Curt came over and squatted down beside the boy. "What was in there?" he asked gently. "You built it."

The boy's lips moved. "A *Left*," he muttered almost inaudibly. "There was a *Left*, I know it. The first real *Left*. And it hung on."

Pat and Curt glanced at each other uneasily. "What's he talking about?" Pat asked.

Curt got behind the wheel of the car and pushed open the doors for the two of them. "I don't know. But I think we'd better get back to town. I'll talk to Fairchild and get this business of Anti-Psi cleared up. Once that's out of the way, you and I can devote ourselves to Tim for the rest of our lives."

FAIRCHILD was pale and tired as he sat behind his desk in his office, hands folded in front of him, a few Norm-class advisors here and there, listening intently. Dark circles mooned under his eyes. As he listened to Curt he sipped at a glass of tomato juice.

"In other words," Fairchild muttered, "you're saying we can't really trust you Psis. It's a paradox." His voice broke with despair. "A Psi comes here and says *all Psis lie*. What the hell am I supposed to do?"

"Not all Psis." Being able to preview the scene gave Curt re-

markable calmness. "I'm saying that in a way Terra is right . . . the existence of super-talented humans poses a problem for those without super-talents. But Terra's answer is wrong; sterilization is vicious and senseless. But co-operation isn't as easy as you imagine. You're dependent on our talents for survival and that means we have you where we want you. We can dictate to you because, without us, Terra would come in and clap you all into military prison."

"And destroy you Psis," the old man standing behind Fairchild reminded him. "Don't forget that."

Curt eyed the old man. It was the same wide-shouldered, gray-faced individual of the night before. There was something familiar about him. Curt peered closer and gasped, in spite of his preview.

"You're a Psi," he said.

The old man bowed slightly. "Evidently."

"Come on," Fairchild said. "All right, we've seen this girl and we'll accept your theory of Anti-Psi. *What do you want us to do?*" He wiped his forehead miserably. "I know Reynolds is a menace. But damn it, Terran infiltrators would be running all around here without the Corps!"

"I want you to create a legal fourth class," Curt stated. "The

Anti-Psi class. I want you to give it status-immunity from sterilization. I want you to publicize it. Women come in here with their children from all parts of the Colonies, trying to convince you they've got Psis to offer, not Mutes. I want you to set up the Anti-Psi class as a similar goal, to get them started selecting the Anti-Psi talents out where we can utilize them."

Fairchild licked his dry lips. "You think more exist already?"

"Very possibly. I came on Pat by accident. But get the flow started! Get the mothers hovering anxiously over their cribs for Anti-Psis . . . We'll need all we can get."

There was silence.

"**C**ONSIDER what Mr. Purcell is doing," the old man said at last. "An Anti-Precog may arise, a person whose actions in the future can't be previewed. A sort of Heisenberg's indeterminate particle . . . a man who throws off all precog prediction. And yet Mr. Purcell has come here to make his suggestions. He's thinking of Separation, not himself."

Fairchild's fingers twitched. "Reynolds is going to be mad as hell."

"He's already mad," Curt said. "He undoubtedly knows about this right now."

"He'll protest!"

Curt laughed, some of the officials smiled. "Of course he'll protest. Don't you understand? *You're being eliminated.* You think Norms are going to be around much longer? Charity is damn scarce in this universe. You Norms gape at Psis like rustics at a carnival. Wonderful . . . magical. You encouraged Psis, built the School, gave us our chance here in the Colonies. In fifty years you'll be slave laborers for us. You'll be doing our manual labor — unless you have sense enough to create the fourth class, the Anti-Psi class. You've got to stand up to Reynolds."

"I hate to alienate him," Fairchild muttered. "Why the hell can't we all work together?" He appealed to the others around the room. "Why can't we all be brothers?"

"Because," Curt answered, "we're not. Face facts. Brotherhood is a fine idea, but it'll come into existence sooner if we achieve a balance of social forces."

"Is it possible," the old man suggested, "that once the concept of Anti-Psi reaches Terra the sterilization program will be modified? This idea may erase the irrational terror the non-mutants have, their phobia that we're monsters about to invade and take over their world. Sit next

to them in theaters. Marry their sisters."

"All right," Fairchild agreed. "I'll construct an official directive. Give me an hour to word it—I want to get all the loopholes out."

Curt got to his feet. It was over. As he had previewed, Fairchild had agreed. "We should start getting reports almost at once," he said. "As soon as routine checking of the files begins."

Fairchild nodded. "Yes, almost at once."

"I assume you'll keep me informed." Apprehension moved through Curt. He had succeeded . . . or had he? He scanned the next half hour. There was nothing negative he could preview. He caught a quick scene of himself and Pat, himself and Julie and Tim. But still his uneasiness remained, an intuition deeper than his precog.

Everything looked fine, but he knew better. Something basic and chilling had gone wrong.

IV

HE met Pat in a small out-of-the-way bar at the rim of the city. Darkness flickered around their table. The air was thick and pungent with the presence of people. Bursts of muted laughter broke out, muffled by the steady blur of conversation.

"How'd it go?" she asked, eyes large and dark, as he seated himself across from her. "Did Fairchild agree?"

Curt ordered a Tom Collins for her and bourbon and water for himself. Then he outlined what had taken place.

"So everything's all right." Pat reached across the table to touch his hand. "Isn't it?"

Curt sipped at his drink. "I guess so. The Anti-Psi class is being formed. But it was too easy. Too simple."

"You can see ahead, can't you? Is anything going to happen?"

Across the dark room the music machine was creating vague patterns of sound, random harmonics and rhythms in a procession of soft clusters that drifted through the room. A few couples moved languidly together in response to the shifting patterns.

Curt offered her a cigarette and the two of them lit up from the candle in the center of the table. "Now you have your status."

Pat's dark eyes flickered. "Yes, that's so. The new Anti-Psi class. I don't have to worry now. That's all over."

"We're waiting for others. If no others show, you're a member of a unique class. The only Anti-Psi in the Universe."

For a moment Pat was silent. Then she asked. "What do you see after that?" She sipped her

drink. "I mean, I'm going to stay here, aren't I? Or will I be going back?"

"You'll stay here."

"With you?"

"With me. And with Tim."

"What about Julie?"

"The two of us signed mutual releases a year ago. They're on file, somewhere. Never processed. It was an agreement we made, so neither of us could block the other later on."

"I think Tim likes me. He won't mind, will he?"

"Not at all," Curt said.

"It ought to be nice, don't you think? The three of us. We can work with Tim, try to find out about his talent, what he is and what he's thinking. I'd enjoy that . . . he responds to me. And we have a long time; there's no hurry."

HER fingers clasped around his. In the shifting darkness of the bar her features swam close to his own. Curt leaned forward, hesitated a moment as her warm breath stained his lips and then kissed her.

Pat smiled up at him. "They're so many things for us to do. Here, and perhaps later on Prox VI. I want to go back there, sometime. Could we? Just for a while; we wouldn't have to stay. So I can see that it's still going on, all the things I worked at all my life.

So I could see my world."

"Sure," Curt said. "Yes, we'll go back there."

Across from them a nervous little man had finished his garlic bread and wine. He wiped his mouth, glanced at his wristwatch and got to his feet. As he squeezed past Curt he reached into his pocket, jangled change and jerkily brought out his hand. Gripping a slender tube, he turned around, bent over Pat, and depressed the tube.

A single pellet dribbled from the tube, clung for a split second to the shiny surface of her hair, and then was gone. A dull echo of vibration rolled up toward the, nearby tables. The nervous little man continued on.

Curt was on his feet, numb with shock. He was still gazing down, paralyzed, when Reynolds appeared beside him and firmly pulled him away.

"She's dead," Reynolds was saying. "Try to understand. She died instantly; there was no pain. It goes directly to the central nervous system. She wasn't even aware of it."

Nobody in the bar had stirred. They sat at their tables, faces impassive, watching as Reynolds signaled for more light. The darkness faded and the objects of the room leaped into clarity.

"Stop that machine," Reynolds ordered sharply. The music

machine stumbled into silence. "These people here are Corpsmen," he explained to Curt. "We probed your thoughts about this place as you entered Fairchild's office."

"But I didn't catch it," Curt muttered. "There was no warning. No preview."

"The man who killed her is an Anti-Psi," Reynolds said. "We've known of the category for a number of years; remember, it took an initial probe to uncover Patricia Connley's shield."

"Yes," Curt agreed. "She was probed years ago. By one of you."

"We don't like the Anti-Psi idea. We wanted to keep the class out of existence, but we were interested. We've uncovered and neutralized fourteen Anti-Psis over the past decade. On this, we have virtually the whole Psi-class behind us—except you. The problem, of course, is that no Anti-Psi talent can be brought out unless matched against the Psionic talent it negates."

Curt understood. "You had to match this man against a Precog. And there's only one Precog other than myself."

"Julie was cooperative. We brought the problem to her a few months ago. We had definite proof to give her concerning your affair with this girl. I don't understand how you expected to

keep Telepaths from knowing your plans, but apparently you did. In any case, the girl is dead. And there won't be any Anti-Psi class. We waited as long as possible, for we don't like to destroy talented individuals. But Fairchild was on the verge of signing the enabling legislation, so we couldn't hold off any longer."

Curt hit out frantically, knowing even as he did so that it was futile. Reynolds slid back; his foot tangled with the table and he staggered. Curt leaped on him, smashed the tall cold glass that had held Pat's drink and lifted the jagged edges over Reynolds' face.

Corpsmen pulled him off.

CURT broke away. He reached down and gathered up Pat's body. She was still warm; her face was calm, expressionless, an empty burned-out shell that mirrored nothing. He carried her from the bar and out onto the frigid night-dark street. A moment later he lowered her into his car and crept behind the wheel.

He drove to the School, parked the car, and carried her into the main building. Pushing past astonished officials, he reached the childrens' quarters and forced open the door to Sally's rooms with his shoulder.

She was wide-awake and fully

dressed. Seated on a straight-backed chair the child faced him defiantly. "You see?" she shrilled. "See what you did?"

He was too dazed to answer. "It's all your fault! You made Reynolds do it. He *had* to kill her." She leaped to her feet and ran toward him, screaming hysterically. "You're an enemy! You're against us! You want to make trouble for all of us. I told Reynolds what you were doing and he—"

Her voice trailed off as he moved out of the room with his heavy armload. As he lumbered up the corridor the hysterical girl followed after him.

"You want to go across—you want me to get Big Noodle to take you across!" She ran in front of him, darting here and there like a maniacal insect. Tears ran down her cheeks; her face was distorted beyond recognition. She followed him all the way to Big Noodle's chamber. "I'm not going to help you! You're against all of us and I'm never going to help you again! I'm *glad* she's dead! I wish you were dead, too. And you're going to be dead when Reynolds catches you. He told me so. He said there wasn't going to be any more like you and we would have things the way they ought to be, and nobody, not you nor any of those *numbskulls* can stop us!"

He lowered Pat's body onto the floor and moved out of the chamber. Sally raced after him.

"You know what he did to Fairchild? He has him fixed so he can't do anything ever again."

Curt tripped a locked door and entered his son's room. The door closed after him and the girl's frenzied screams died to a muffled vibration. Tim sat up in bed, surprised and half-stupefied by sleep.

"Come on," Curt said. He dragged the boy from his bed, dressed him, and hurried him outside into the hall.

Sally stopped them as they re-entered Big Noodle's chamber. "He won't do it," she screamed. "He's afraid of me and I told him not to. You understand?"

BIG Noodle lay slumped in his massive chair. He lifted his great head as Curt approached him. "What do you want?" he muttered. "What's the matter with her?" He indicated Pat's inert body. "She pass out or something?"

"Reynolds killed her!" Sally shrilled, dancing around Curt and his son. "And he's going to kill Mr. Purcell! He's going to kill everybody that tries to stop us!"

Big Noodle's thick features darkened. The wattles of bristly flesh turned a flushed, mottled crimson. "What's going on,

Curt?" he muttered.

"The Corps is taking over," Curt answered.

"They killed your girl?"

"Yes."

Big Noodle strained to a sitting position and leaned forward. "Reynolds is after you?"

"Yes."

Big Noodle licked his thick lips hesitantly. "Where do you want to go?" he asked hoarsely. "I can move you out of here, to Terra, maybe. Or—"

Sally made frantic motions with her hands. Part of Big Noodle's chair writhed and became animate. The arms twisted around him, cut viciously into his puddinglike paunch. He retched and closed his eyes.

"I'll make you sorry!" Sally chanted. "I can do terrible things to you!"

"I don't want to go to Terra," Curt said. He gathered up Pat's body and motioned Tim over beside him. "I want to go to Proxima VI."

Big Noodle struggled to make up his mind. Outside the room officials and Corpsmen were in cautious motion. A bedlam of sound and uncertainty rang up and down the corridors.

Sally's shrill voice rose over the rumble of sound as she tried to attract Big Noodle's attention. "You know what I'll do! You know what will happen to you!"

Big Noodle made his decision. He tried an abortive stab at Sally before turning to Curt; a ton of molten plastic transported from some Terran factory cascaded down on her in a hissing torrent. Sally's body dissolved, one arm raised and twitching, the echo of her voice still hanging in the air.

Big Noodle had acted, but the warp directed at him from the dying girl was already in existence. As Curt felt the air of space - transformation all around him, he caught a final glimpse of Big Noodle's torment. He had never known precisely what it was Sally dangled over the big idiot's head. Now he saw it and understood Big Noodle's hesitation. A high-pitched scream rattled from Big Noodle's throat and around Curt as the chamber ebbed away. Big Noodle altered and flowed as Sally's change engulfed him.

Curt realized, then, the amount of courage buried in the vegetable rolls of fat. Big Noodle had known the risk, taken it, and accepted—more or less—the consequences.

The vast body had become a mass of crawling spiders. What had been Big Noodle was now a mound of hairy, quivering beings, thousands of them, spiders without number, dropping off and clinging again, clustering and separating and reclustering.

And then the chamber was gone. He was across.

IT was early afternoon. He lay for a time, half-buried in tangled vines. Insects hummed around him, seeking moisture from the stalks of foul-smelling flowers. The red-tinted sky baked in the mounting sunlight. Far off, an animal of some kind called mournfully.

Nearby, his son stirred. The boy got to his feet, wandered about aimlessly and finally approached his father.

Curt pulled himself up. His clothes were torn. Blood oozed down his cheek, into his mouth. He shook his head, shuddered, and looked around.

Pat's body lay a few feet off. A crumpled and broken thing, it was without life of any kind. A hollow husk, abandoned and deserted.

He made his way over to her. For a time he squatted on his haunches, gazing vacantly down at her. Then he leaned over, picked her up, and struggled to his feet.

"Come on," he said to Tim, "let's get started."

They walked a long time. Big Noodle had dropped them between villages, in the turgid chaos of the Proxima VI forests. Once he stopped in an open field and rested. Against the line

of drooping trees a waver of blue smoke drifted. A kiln, perhaps. Or somebody clearing away the brush. He lifted Pat up in his arms again and continued on.

When he crashed from the underbrush and out into the road, the villagers were paralyzed with fright. Some of them raced off, a few remained, staring blankly at the man and the boy beside him.

"Who are you?" one of them demanded as he fumbled for a hack-knife. "What have you got there?"

They got a work-truck for him, allowed him to dump Pat in with the rough-cut lumber, and then drove him and his son to the nearest village. He wasn't far off, only a hundred miles. From the common store of the village he was given heavy work clothes and fed. Tim was bathed and cared for, and a general conference was called.

He sat at a huge, rough table, littered with remains of the mid-day meal. He knew their decision; he could preview it without trouble.

"She can't fix up anybody that far gone," the leader of the village explained to him. "The girl's whole upper ganglia and brain are gone, and most of the spinal column."

He listened, but didn't speak. Afterwards, he wangled a bat-

tered truck, loaded Pat and Tim in, and started on. /

HER village had been notified by short-wave radio. He was pulled from the truck by savage hands; a pandemonium of noise and fury boiled around him, excited faces distorted by grief and horror. Shouts, outraged shoves, questions, a blur of men and women milling and pushing until finally her brothers cleared a path for him to their home.

They laid her out on a table and examined her with shaking hands.

"It's useless," her father was saying to him. "And the old woman's gone, I think. That was years ago." The man gestured toward the mountains. "She lived up there—used to come down. Not for years." He grabbed Curt roughly. "It's too late, God damn it! She's dead! You can't bring her back!"

He listened to the words, still said nothing. He had no interest in predictions of any kind. When they had finished talking to him, he gathered up Pat's body, carried it back to the truck, called his son and continued on.

It grew cold and silent as the truck wheezily climbed the road into the mountains. Frigid air plucked at him; the road was obscured by dense clouds of mist that billowed up from the chalky

soil. At one point a lumbering animal barred his way until he drove it off by throwing rocks at it. Finally the truck ran out of fuel and stopped. He got out, stood for a time, then woke up his son and continued on foot.

It was almost dark when he found the hut perched on a lip of rock. A fetid stench of offal and drying hides stung his nose as he staggered past heaps of discarded rubble, tin cans and boxes, rotting fabric and vermin-infested lumber.

The old woman was watering a patch of wretched vegetables. As he approached, she lowered her sprinkling can and turned toward him, wrinkled face tight with suspicion and wonder.

"I can't do it," she said flatly as she crouched over Pat's inert body. She ran her dry, leathery hands over the dead face, pulled aside the girl's shirt and kneaded the cold flesh at the base of the neck. She pushed aside the tangle of black hair and gripped the skull with her strong fingers. "No, I can't do a thing." Her voice was rusty and harsh in the night fog that billowed around them. "She's burned out. No tissue left to repair."

Curt made his cracked lips move. "Is there another?" he grated. "Any more Resurrectionists here?"

The old woman struggled to

her feet. "Nobody can help you, don't you understand? She's dead!"

He remained. He asked the question again and again. Finally there was a begrudging answer. Somewhere on the other side of the planet there was supposed to be a competitor. He gave the old woman his cigarettes and lighter and fountain pen, picked up the cold body and started back. Tim trailed after him, head drooping, body bent with fatigue.

"Come on," Curt ordered harshly. The old woman watched silently as they threaded their way down by the light of Proxima VI's two sullen, yellowed moons.

HE got only a quarter mile. In some way, without warning, her body was gone. He had lost her, dropped her along the way. Somewhere among the rubbish-littered rocks and weeds that fingered their way over the trail. Probably into one of the deep gorges that cut into the jagged side of the mountain.

He sat down on the ground and rested. There was nothing left. Fairchild had dwindled into the hands of the Corps. Big Noodle was destroyed by Sally. Sally was gone, too. The Colonies were open to the Terrans; their wall against projectiles had dis-

solved when Big Noodle died. And Pat.

There was a sound behind him. Panting with despair and fatigue, he turned only slightly. For a brief second he thought it was Tim catching up with him. He strained to see; the shape that emerged from the half-light was too tall, too sure-footed. A familiar shape.

"You're right," the old man said, the ancient Psi who had stood beside Fairchild. He came up, vast and awesome in the aged yellow moonlight. "There's no use trying to bring her back. It could be done, but it's too difficult. And there're other things for you and me to think about."

Curt scrambled off. Falling, sliding, slashed by the stones under him, he made his way blindly down the trail. Dirt rattled after him while choking, he struggled onto the level ground.

When he halted again, it was Tim who came after him. For an instant he thought it had been an illusion, a figment of his imagination. The old man was gone; he hadn't been there.

He didn't fully understand until he saw the change take place in front of him. And this time it went the other way. He realized that this one was a *Left*. And it was a familiar figure, but in a different way. A figure he remembered from the past.

Where the boy of eight had stood, a wailing, fretful baby of sixteen months struggled and groped. Now the substitution had gone in the other direction . . . and he couldn't deny what his eyes saw.

"All right," he said, when the eight-year-old Tim reappeared and the baby was gone. But the boy remained only a moment. He vanished almost at once, and this time a new shape stood on the trail. A man in his middle thirties, a man Curt had never seen before.

A familiar man.

"*You're my son,*" Curt said.

THAT'S right." The man applauded him in the dim light. "You realize that she can't be brought back, don't you? We have to get that out of the way before we can proceed."

Curt nodded wearily. "I know."

"Fine." Tim advanced toward him, hand out. "Then let's get back down. We have a lot to do. We middle and extreme Rights have been trying to get through for some time. It's been difficult to come back without the approval of the Center one. And in these cases the Center is too young to understand."

"So that's what he meant," Curt murmured as the two of them made their way along the road, toward the village. "The

Others are himself, along his time-track."

"Left is previous Others," Tim answered. "Right, of course, is the future. You said that Precog and Precog made nothing. Now you know. They make the ultimate Precog—the ability to move through time."

"You Others were trying to get over. He'd see you and be frightened."

"It was very hard, but we knew eventually he'd grow old enough to comprehend. He built up an elaborate mythology. That is, we did. I did." Tim laughed. "You see, there still isn't an adequate terminology. There never is for a unique happening."

"I could change the future," Curt said, "because I could see into it. But I couldn't change the present. You can change the present by going back into the past. That's why that extreme Right Other, the old man, hung around Fairchild."

"That was our first successful crossing. We were finally able to induce the Center to take his two steps Right. That switched the two, but it took time."

"What's going to happen now?" Curt asked. "The war? The Separation? All this about Reynolds?"

"As you realized before, we can alter it by going back. It's dangerous. A simple change in

the past may completely alter the present. The time-traveling talent is the most critical—and the most Promethean. Every other talent, without exception, can change only what's going to happen. I could wipe out everything that stands. I precede everyone and everything. Nothing can be used against me. I am always there first. I have always been there."

CURT was silent as they passed the abandoned, rusting truck. Finally he asked, "What is Anti-Psi? What did you have to do with that?"

"Not much," his son said. "You can take credit for bringing it out into the open, since we didn't begin operating until the last few hours. We came along in time to aid it—you saw us with Fairchild. We're *sponsoring* Anti-Psi. You'd be surprised to see some of the alternate time-paths on which Anti-Psi fails to get pushed forward. Your precog was right—they're not very pleasant."

"So I've had help lately."

"We're behind you, yes. And from now on, our help will increase. Always, we try to introduce balances. Stalemates, such as Anti-Psi. Right now, Reynolds is a little out of balance, but he can easily be checked. Steps are being taken. We're not infinite in power, of course. We're

limited by our life-span, about seventy years. It's a strange feeling to be outside of time. You're outside of change, subject to no laws.

"It's like suddenly being lifted off the chess board and seeing everybody as pieces—seeing the whole Universe as a game of black and white squares—with everybody and every object stuck on his space-time spot. We're off the board; we can reach down from above. Adjust, alter the position of the men, change the game without the pieces knowing. From outside."

"And you won't bring her back?" Curt appealed.

"You can't expect me to be too sympathetic toward the girl," his son said. "After all, Julie is my mother. I know now what they used to mean by *mill of the gods*. I wish we could grind less small . . . I wish we could spare some of those who get caught in the gears. But if you could see it as we do, you'd understand. We have a universe hanging in the balance; it's an awfully big board."

"A board so big that one person doesn't count?" Curt asked, agonized.

His son looked concerned. Curt remembered looking like that himself when trying to explain something to the boy that was beyond a child's comprehension.

He hoped Tim would do a better job than he'd been able to do.

"Not that," Tim said. "To us, she isn't gone. She's still there, on another part of the board that you can't see. She always was there. She always will be. No piece ever falls off the board . . . no matter how small."

"For you," said Curt.

"Yes. We're outside the board. It may be that our talent will be shared by everybody. When that happens, there will be no misunderstanding of tragedy and death."

"And meanwhile?" Curt ached with the tension of *willing* Tim to agree. "I don't have the talent.

To me, she's dead. The place she occupied on the board is empty. Julie can't fill it. Nobody can."

Tim considered. It looked like deep thought, but Curt could sense that his son was moving restlessly along the time-paths, seeking a rebuttal. His eyes focused again on his father and he nodded sadly.

"I can't show you where she is on the board," he said. "And your life is vacant along every path except one."

Curt heard someone coming through the brush. He turned—and then Pat was in his arms.

"This one," Tim said.

—PHILIP K. DICK
